



"This cold blooded massacre served no other purpose than to preserve the Iraqi state from mutinous armed deserters."



Ten Days That Shook Iraq

inside information from an uprising

Plus: The Class Struggle in Iraq - an interview with a veteran

Cover Photo:

Zakhu, Iraq, 27 April 1991 - a refugee camp for the thousands of Kurds who left their homes to flee from Iraqi government forces following the fighting that broke out in Iraq after Operation Desert Storm.

Back Cover Photo:

"Death Mile" on the highway from Kuwait City to Iraq after massacre by U.S. forces, 25 February 1991. U.S. war planes and helicopters circled over the road for hours, destroying every vehicle, including ambulances, and killing thousands of fleeing Iraqis. (Photo: E. Adams/Corbis Sygma)

both documents were written in 1991
in the wake of the first Gulf War

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Ten Days That Shook Iraq

The following text was published as a four page leaflet in 1991 and was one of the first sources of information in English about the uprisings in Southern Iraq and Kurdistan. It was later published in the magazine 'Wildcat.'

The Gulf war was not ended by the military victory of America and the Allies. It was ended by the mass desertion of thousands of Iraqi soldiers. So overwhelming was the refusal to fight for the Iraqi state on the part of its conscripted army that, contrary to all predictions, not one Allied soldier was killed by hostile fire in the final ground offensive to recapture Kuwait. Indeed the sheer scale of this mutiny is perhaps unprecedented in modern military history.

But these mutinous troops did not simply flee back to Iraq. On their return many of them turned their guns against the Iraqi state, sparking a simultaneous uprising in both Southern Iraq and in Kurdistan to the North. Only the central region of Iraq surrounding Baghdad remained firmly in the state's hands in the weeks following the end of the war.

From the very start the Western media has grossly misrepresented these uprisings. The uprising in the South, centred on Basra, was portrayed as a Shia Muslim revolt. Whereas the insurrection in the North was reported as an exclusively Kurdish Nationalist uprising which demanded little more than an autonomous Kurdish region within Iraq.

The truth is that the uprisings in both the North and South of Iraq were proletarian insurrections.

Basra is one of the most secular areas in the Middle East. Almost no one goes to the mosques in Basra. The radical traditions in this area are not those of Islamic fundamentalism but rather those of Arab Nationalism and Stalinism. The Iraqi Communist Party is the only bourgeois party with any significant influence in this region. The cities of Basra, Nasriah and Hilah have long been known as the region of the Communist Party and have a long history of open rebellion against both religion

and the state. The "Iraqi" working class has always been one of the most troublesome in a volatile region.

In the North, there is little sympathy for the Nationalist parties - the KDP and the PUK - and their peshmergas (guerrilla movements) due to the repeated failure of their compromises with the Iraqi state. This is particularly true in the Sulaimania area. The inhabitants of the area have been especially hostile to the Nationalists since the Halabja massacre. Following the chemical attack by the Iraqi air force against deserters and civilians in the city of Halabja in 1988, the peshmergas initially prevented people from fleeing and then went on to pillage and rape those who survived the massacre. As a result, many villagers have long since refused to feed or shelter nationalist peshmergas. As in the South, the Communist Party and its peshmergas are more popular.

The uprising in the North was not nationalist. In the early stages Ba'athist officials and secret police were executed, police files were destroyed and the prisons stormed. People were openly hostile to the bourgeois policies of the Kurdish Nationalists. In Sulaimania the Nationalist peshmergas were excluded from the city and the exiled leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Jalal Talabani, was prevented from returning to his home town. When the Kurdish Democratic Party leader, Massoud Barzani, went to Chamchamal, near to Sulaimania, he was attacked and two of his bodyguards were killed. When the Nationalists broadcast the slogan: "Now's the time to kill the Ba'athists!" the people of Sulaimania replied with the slogan: "Now's the time for the Nationalists to loot Porsches!", meaning that the Nationalists were only interested in looting.

A revolutionary group, "Communist Perspective", played a major role in the insurrection. In their publication, "Proletariat", they advocated the setting up of workers' councils. This provoked fear and anger among the Nationalists, as well as the Communist Party and its splinter groups.

Faced with these proletarian uprisings the various bourgeois interests in the region had to suspend hostilities and unite to suppress them. It is well known that the West, led by the USA,

But despite everything, nationalism hasn't managed to create unbridgeable obstacles. Proof of this is the latest uprising. When Iraqis in the south rose up against Saddam after the war, their efforts were supported by northerners. Arab soldiers in the north, voluntarily gave up their arms to the Kurds.

Q: Finally let us talk about the future of the class struggle in Iraq. I think the Americans are still banking on a Romanian scenario, i.e. a popular uprising from below followed by a preplanned coup d'etat from above to oust Saddam. Do you agree?

A: Yes, probably. But the Iraqi situation is more complicated than Romania, and the divisions between Kurds and Arabs, Arab and Turks, and Sunni and Shi'ite muslims could easily lead to a prolonged civil war situation. And the next regime will probably be more religiously orientated. So there are differences with Romania.

The strongest party seems to be the *Al-Dawa* (Shi'ite) which receives backing from Iran. The *Radical Ba'ths* are not very popular and has connections with Syria. The I.C.P hasn't got the power it once used to have but mustn't be underestimated. Its base, however, seems to be amongst the elder generations and not the young.

As for the *Patriotic Union of Kurds* (PUK) and the *Democratic Party of Kurdistan* (DPK), they used to have about 5000 armed peshmergas before the recent events and are not as significant a force as the media makes out. The Kurdish towns are being taken not by the political parties but the people. *Akhvan al-muslimin* is the last powerful Sunni organisation being supported by both Egypt and at times US.

All in all it must be said that the future of autonomous proletarian activity in Iraq is not very bright.

again, we have once again started to organise ourselves and meet regularly.

Q: The media here is explicitly giving encouragement to Kurdish nationalism. Can you tell us a little about the origins of Kurdish nationalism?

A: In the mid 50's there was no such thing as a Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq. Sometimes at times of crisis, capitalism would financially induce a Kurdish feudal landlord to organise something, that they would name a 'nationalist movement'. In order to give these leaders credibility, the central government would move 'against' them.

At these times, there was no real Kurdish patriotic identity, it had to be artificially fostered. Arabs and Kurds viewed their struggle as one. Kurdish nationalist leaders who shared power with the central government, broke with them once they received support from the west and the Shah. But they lacked a popular base and had to escape to the mountains. They organised a militia but were defeated severely at first because their soldiers were *not* volunteers. Learning from their mistakes, they organised the Peshmerga - a guerrilla outfit - and looked for better weapons. They began to engage in sectarian murder. For example, they would get hold of an Arab driver and execute him for *being* an Arab.

Q: Sounds a bit like Irish nationalists over here?

A: Yes, very similar, innocent Arab workers and students were murdered, and the government in turn would make capital out of this by publicising 'Kurdish' atrocities, whipping up anti-Kurdish sentiments. Iraqi generals would deliberately send young, inexperienced soldiers into Kurdish areas, knowing full well they were cannon-fodder for the peshmerga. The next day, a Kurdish village would be destroyed by the regular Iraqi army in revenge. All these tactics helped to divide the proletariat.

have long backed Saddam Hussein's brutal regime. They supported him in the war against Iran.

In supporting Saddam the Western ruling class also recognised that the Ba'athist Party, as a mass based fascist party, was the only force in Iraq capable and ruthless enough to repress the oil producing proletariat.

However, Saddam's ultimate strategy for maintaining social peace in Iraq was for a permanent war drive and militarisation of society. But such a strategy could only lead to further economic ruin and the intensification of class antagonisms. In the Spring of 1990 this contradiction was becoming blatant. The Iraqi economy was shattered after eight years of war with Iran. Oil production, the main source of hard currency, was restricted while oil prices were relatively low. The only options for redeeming wartime promises of prosperity in peace were a rise in the price of oil or more war. The former choice was blocked by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Saddam's bold leap to resolve this impasse was to annex Kuwait and its rich oil fields.

This gave America the opportunity to reassert its political hegemony, not only in the Middle East, but also in the world as a whole. With the hope of exorcising the spectre of Vietnam, the Bush regime prepared for all-out war. The Bush administration hoped for a quick and decisive victory that would evict Iraq from Kuwait but at the same time leave the Iraqi regime intact. However, to mobilise the home front for war, Bush had to equate Saddam with Hitler and so became increasingly committed publicly to toppling the Iraqi leader.

With this commitment the American government now sought to impose such a military defeat on the Ba'athist Party would be obliged to replace Saddam with someone else. Indeed the Bush regime openly invited the ruling circles in Iraq to replace Saddam Hussein with the approach of the ground war in March. However, the mass desertion of Iraqi conscripts and the subsequent uprisings in Iraq robbed the American government of such a convenient victory. Instead they faced the prospect of the uprising turning into a full scale proletarian revolution, with all the dire consequences this would have for the accumulation of capital in the Middle East.

The last thing the American government wanted was to be drawn into a prolonged military occupation of Iraq in order to suppress the uprisings. It was far more efficient to back the existing state. But there was no time to insist on the removal of Saddam Hussein. They could ill afford the disruption this would cause. Hence, almost overnight, Bush's hostility to the butcher of Baghdad evaporated. The two rival butchers went into partnership.

Their first task was to crush the uprising in the South which was being swelled by the huge columns of deserters streaming north from Kuwait. Even though these fleeing Iraqi conscripts posed no military threat to Allied troops, or to the objective of "liberating" Kuwait, the war was prolonged long enough for them to be carpet bombed on the road to Basra by the RAF and the USAF. This cold blooded massacre served no other purpose than to preserve the Iraqi state from mutinous armed deserters.

Following this massacre the Allied ground forces, having swept through southern Iraq to encircle Kuwait, stopped short of Basra and gave free rein to the Republican Guards - the elite troops loyal to the Iraqi regime - to crush the insurgents. All proposals to inflict a decisive defeat on the Republican Guards or to proceed towards Baghdad to topple Saddam were quickly forgotten. In the ceasefire negotiations the Allied forces insisted on the grounding of all fixed wing aircraft but the use of helicopters vital for counter-insurgency was permitted for "administrative purposes". This "concession" proved important once the uprising in the South was put down and the Iraqi state's attention turned to the advancing insurrection in the North.

Whereas the uprising in the Basra region was crushed almost as it began, the Northern uprising had more time to develop. It began in Raniah and spread to Sulaimania and Kut and at its height threatened to spread beyond Kurdistan to the capital. The original aim of the uprising was expressed in the slogan: "We will celebrate our New Year with the Arabs in Baghdad!" The defeat of this rebellion owed as much to the Kurdish Nationalists as to the Western powers and the Iraqi state.

to anarchist ideas by comrades from Baghdad. There was a Lebanese journal, called *Darasat al-arabie*, which was critical of both Leninism and Marxism. We didn't always agree with them, but they influenced us greatly.

Q: Did these revolutionaries develop their own independent critique of Leninism or did they borrow it from the west?

A: Unfortunately us 'eastern' communists have always been awe-struck by our 'western' comrades, and looked in their direction for divine inspiration as muslims look at *Kiblah* (Direction towards which muslims turn in praying). Consequently we have always relied on them for an understanding of capitalism.

But gradually we came to realise that the previous parties we were involved in were like cages for our minds, stifling our independence. Consequently we rejected 'Third Worldism' and 'Socialist' revolution and understood that the only worthwhile path is a *Communist* revolution (the abolition of wage slavery, money and the state). We began criticising Lenin here and there but a complete critique of Leninism came later.

At this stage we decided to form a new organisation called *Fasileh* (later renamed *Kar*). Our programme was very eclectic. It contained good and also bad things. With the help of some Anarchists we started publishing a magazine in Arabic and Kurdish. The level of class struggle inside Iraq was very low, but the regime's repression was fierce. The state tried very hard to find us but we were careful. *Mokhaberat* (security service) would offer reward for our arrest and finally they raided us.

I got away but a comrade was later arrested, and most probably executed. We decided to send some comrades abroad to learn from the experience of the world proletariat and establish internationalist contacts. But when we got here, we found the level of class struggle was even lower! This coupled with the usual refugee problems led to petty personal quibblings which made us forget the purpose of coming abroad. But now that things are beginning to pick up

remained very popular. He is now Ba'thist ambassador to France!

Q: Unlike neighbouring Iran where guerrilla activity by leftists never threatened the regime.

A: Yes, in Iraq armed struggle was far more widespread. Assassinations of individual capitalists led to wide-scale armed confrontations, and it must be said these actions were extremely popular amongst the population. But the truth is that our security measures were inadequate. We temporarily controlled the streets because we had guns but when the '68 coup d'etat succeeded, we became very exposed. Even our leaders made horrendous mistakes, and a lot of comrades were arrested and executed.

I don't want to give the impression that the regime only used repression in dealing with the class struggle. No, they used the usual carrot and stick tactics and it worked. Between 1968 and 1974 the state became far more powerful. Again in 1972 the I.C.P. entered into a pact with Ba'ths. It is incredible how completely degenerate these Stalinists are. In 1975 the Algiers Agreement between Saddam and the Shah, meant that both leaders could turn their attention towards their internal problems. The Kurdish uprising collapsed very fast and Saddam became even more powerful.

Q: Can you now talk about your own break first from Stalinism and then from Leninism in general?

A: We knew some comrades in Baghdad, Basra and Kurdistan who were also dissatisfied with the prevalent ideologies. At that time, we thought armed guerrilla struggle was the be all and end all of the revolution, but gradually and under the influence of the Iranian revolution we became very critical of guerrilla activity.

I made two visits to Iran during the revolution and brought back new ideas. We became acquainted with Trotsky's critique of Stalin and later on we were introduced

Like all nationalist movements the Kurdish Nationalists defend the interests of the propertied classes against the working class. Most Kurdish Nationalist leaders come from very rich families. For example, Talabani comes from a dynasty originally set up by the British and his parents own luxury hotels in England. The KDP was set up by rich exiles driven out of Kurdistan by the mass working class uprisings of 1958 when hundreds of landowners and capitalist were strung up. As a result of these disturbing events a meeting of exiled bourgeois in Razaia, Iran, organised nationalist death squads to kill class struggle militants in Iraqi Kurdistan. Later they carried out racist murders of Arabs. During the Iraq-Iran war very few deserters joined the nationalists and the PUK received an amnesty from the Iraqi state in return for repressing deserters.

These Kurdish Nationalists, like the international bourgeoisie, recognised the importance of a strong Iraqi state in order to maintain capital accumulation against a militant working class. So much so, in fact, that they merely demanded that Iraqi Kurdistan be granted the status of an autonomous region within a united Iraq.

In the uprising they did their best to defend the Iraqi state. They actively intervened to prevent the destruction of police files and state property, including military bases. The Nationalists stopped Arab deserters from joining the "Kurdish" uprising, disarmed them, and sent them back to Baghdad to be arrested. They did all they could to prevent the uprising from spreading beyond the "borders" of Kurdistan which was its only hope of success. When the Iraqi state began to turn its attention to the uprising in Kurdistan the Kurdish Nationalists' radio broadcasts did not encourage or co-ordinate resistance but instead exaggerated the threat posed by the demoralised Iraqi troops still loyal to the government and advised people to flee to the mountains. Which they eventually did. None of this is any surprise if we examine their history.

Although, as we have seen, there was much hostility towards the Kurdish Nationalists, they were able to gain control and bring to a halt the insurrection in Kurdistan because of their organisation and greater material resources. Having been long backed by the West - the KDP by the USA and the PUK by

Britain - it was the Kurdish Nationalist parties that were able to control the supply of food and information. This was vital, since after years of deprivation, exacerbated by the war, the search for food was an overriding concern. Many individuals were mainly content with looting food, rather than with maintaining revolutionary organisation and the development of the insurrection. This weakness allowed the Nationalist organisations to step in with their ample supplies of food and well established radio stations.

The War in the Gulf was brought to an end by the refusal of the Iraqi working class to fight and by the subsequent uprisings in Iraq. But such proletarian actions were crushed by the combined efforts of the various international and national bourgeois forces. Once again, nationalism has served as the stumbling block for proletarian insurrection. While it is important to stress that Middle East politics is not dominated by Islamic fundamentalism and Arab Nationalism, as it is usually portrayed in the bourgeois press, but rests on class conflict, it must be said that the immediate prospects for the development of working class struggle in Iraq are now bleak.

The war not only resulted in the defeat of the Iraqi working class but also revealed the state of defeat of the working class in the USA, and, to a lesser degree, Europe. The western anti-war movement never developed into a mass working class opposition to the war. It remained dominated by a pacifist orientation that "opposed" the war in terms of an alternative national interest: "Peace is Patriotic". While it expressed abhorrence of the Allies' holocaust it opposed doing anything to stop it that might bring it into confrontation with the state. Instead it concentrated on futile symbolic protest that simply fostered the sense of helplessness in the face of the state's war machine.

Following the defeat of the insurrection, the Western media's misrepresentation continued. The proletariat was represented as helpless victims, ripe for patronizing by the charities, grateful for the spectacles of pop stars flogging the Live Aid horse once more. For those that remembered the uprising a "Let It Be... Kurdistan" t-shirt was the obvious answer. Whilst the uprising was defeated we cannot allow its aims and

Q: Why was there so much support for the I.C.P. and Kurdish nationalists despite their reactionary policies?

A: That is a difficult question. The people were not happy with either group and especially felt let down by the I.C.P. , but there was no real revolutionary alternative so people tended to give the I.C.P. the benefit of the doubt and apologise for their 'shortcomings'. They would say naively: "The Iraqi Communist Party is young and is bound to make mistakes, but soon they would mature like their Russian and Chinese counterparts" (!!) I suppose there just wasn't the necessary consciousness to see these parties for what they are.

In 1963 Qasim was overthrown by the Ba'thists and a period of intense violence resulted in the death of thousands of activists. The Ba'ths were supplied a list of known 'trouble makers' probably by the CIA. During Qasim's last days the people demanded weapons from him for protection against the National Guards, but he refused to arm them. Even then the military were so unpopular that they had to trick the people in order to get into the cities. They put photographs of Qasim at the front of their tanks, the people thought they intended to defend them from the Ba'thists, so they were not opposed, until it was too late.

Q: The Ba'ths first experiment in dictatorship was unsuccessful but they got into power again in 1968. Can you tell us about Saddam Hussein's personal path towards power?

A: Saddam was a cut throat petty gangster, which is probably why no one took him too seriously at first. His role in the attempted assassination of Qasim was exaggerated later. Gradually he made himself a power base with the help of his *Takriti* tribe and important landlords.

During the 60s there was a critical re-assessment of the I.C.P. policies of United Front with the Iraqi bosses which eventually led to a split by 'Aziz al-Hajj who was influenced by Mao and Che Guevara. His guerrilla actions were unsuccessful and the group was defeated, but his ideas

A: No, I don't agree with this neat and simple text book analysis, because even prior to '58 the feudals owned not only the rural areas but also a huge portion of the urban areas. Hotels, factories, and residential areas belonged to them as well as the village. The majority of peasants' were therefore proletarians, but with a far worse living standard than their urban counterparts.

Q: In 1958 Qasim and the Free Officers seized power and ousted the Monarchy, but some of the gains were recuperated.

A: That's true but the significant thing was the level of class struggle. The Monarch and some of his ministers were killed by those they called prostitutes. For one year or so no one could control the workers. Even the I.C.P. which unfortunately had a massive base within the population (despite its attacks on the working class) could not control the angry proletariat, basically because workers were armed. People took food from the shops without paying for them. For them money was obsolete.

Q: I hear that even the Koran was desecrated by the workers.

A: Yes that's absolutely right. They understood the reactionary nature of Islam. Also in Kirkuk about 90 generals, capitalists and landlords were taken to the road, had a rope put round their necks and dragged around by car until they were killed. I.C.P. denounced the actions and tried to distance themselves from workers' "excesses".

But gradually with land reforms, the rising price of oil and loans from USSR, the government managed to stabilise the situation in the South. Kurdistan was more resistant. Armed peasants groups (e.g. in Halabja) were not intimidated by either the state or the I.C.P. and took over the land that the escapee owners had left (mostly fleeing to neighbouring Iran). The absentee landowners would send assassins to Iraq and with the connivance of the military kill a revolutionary and then flee to the safety of Iran.

the manner of its defeat to be distorted without challenge" hence this text.

The failure of the working class to recognize its own class interests as distinct from the "national interest" and sabotage the war effort can only serve to deepen the divisions amongst our international class along national lines. Our rulers will now be that much more confident of conducting murderous wars unopposed elsewhere in the world, a confidence they have lacked since the working class ended the Vietnam war by mutinies, desertion, strikes and riots.

OPPOSITION TO THE WAR IN IRAQ

There has been a long tradition of class struggle in Iraq, particularly since the revolution in 1958. With Saddam's strategy of a permanent war drive to maintain social peace this struggle has often taken the form of mass desertion from the army. During the Iraq-Iran war tens of thousands of soldiers deserted the army. This swelled the mass working class opposition to the war. With the unreliability of the army it became increasingly difficult for the Iraqi state to put down such working class rebellions. It was for this reason that Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons against the town of Halabja in 1988.

Following the invasion of Kuwait there were many demonstrations against its continued occupation. Even the ruling Ba'athist Party was obliged to organize such demonstrations under the slogan: "No to Kuwait: We only want Saddam and Iraq!" in order to head off anti-war feeling. With the dramatic rise in the price of necessities - food prices alone rising to twenty times their pre-invasion levels - there was little enthusiasm for war. The common attitude throughout Iraq was one of defeatism.

Despite a 200% pay rise desertion from the army became common. In the city of Sulaimania alone there were an estimated 30,000 deserters. In Kut there were 20,000. So overwhelming was the desertion that it became relatively easy for soldiers to bribe their way out of the army by giving money to

their officers. But these working class conscripts did not merely desert, they organised. In Kut thousands marched on the local police station and forced the police to concede an end to the harassment of deserters.

Two days after the beginning of the war, anti-war riots broke out in Raniah and later in Sulaimania.

This leaflet was produced by revolutionaries from Iraq and Britain. For more copies or correspondence we can be contacted by writing as follows: BM CAT, London WC1N 3XX, UK, or PO BOX 3305, Oakland, CA 94609, USA. TO BE A PATRIOT IS TO BE AN ASSASSIN!

The Class Struggle in Iraq – An Interview with a Veteran

The following interview was first published in 'Workers Scud - no patriot can catch us!' (London, June 1991), a collection of articles reflecting on the Gulf War.

Q: Can you briefly tell us about the class struggle in Iraq before the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958?

A: In the 1940's and early 1950's the class struggle was mainly situated in the rural areas. Peasant uprisings (e.g. in *Aali-azarchi* which lasted about 3 years before being violently suppressed) were a constant headache for the semi-feudal landowners and the state.

Urban struggles intensified with the nine-day strike of Kirkuk oil workers in 1946 (put down with loss of 10 lives). Unemployment and homelessness were rampant. There were thousands of *sarifas* (shacks made of palm branches) around and inside Baghdad.

1956 (Suez Crisis) had a massive impact on Iraq, with demonstrations against the Iraqi regime who were seen as British stooges. The Palestinian issue also helped radicalisation. I still wonder why there wasn't a revolution in 1956!! These internal and external events led to the formation of the *Free Officers* (nationalist/Nasserist) who had links with the Iraqi 'Communist' Party (I.C.P.) but not so much with the Ba'ths.

Q: The way I see it there were two main contradictions in the Iraqi society at this time (1946- 58). One between the emerging proletarian movement and capitalism and one, left over from the past, between capitalism and the feudalist landlords. Do you agree?